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ABSTRACT

This paper describes two techniques designed to offer students genuine communication experiences in a foreign language. In "simulated tutoring," a recording of the tutor's voice is made while he tutors a live subject in the correct pronunciation of a short dialogue. Students subsequently responding to the prerecorded utterances experience the illusion that a live teacher is tutoring them. In "simulated conversation," the student is given information relevant to a communication situation (e.g., making a purchase) which is then simulated for him on tape in the foreign language. He is then confronted, on tape, with a relatively unpredictable set of questions and comments to which he must generate appropriate responses. Both techniques are intended to increase student motivation in programed instruction. (Author/RL)

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Providing Communication Experiences in Programed Foreign Language Instruction

by

George H. Brown

Presentation for
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Prefatory Note

This paper is an expanded version of a paper entitled "Simulated Tutoring in Foreign Language Programing," which was presented at the 1968 meeting of the American Psychological Association. The training techniques described in this paper were developed as part of Work Unit AUTOSPAN, Development and Evaluation of a Self-Instructional Method for Learning a Foreign Language. This Work Unit is being carried out by the Human Resources Research Office, Division No. 7 (Language and Area Training), under the general supervision of Arthur J. Hoehn, Director of Research.

PROVIDING COMMUNICATION EXPERIENCES IN PROGRAMED FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

George H. Brown

Critics of programed instruction in the foreign language field frequently assert that the absence of any genuine communication experience in such instruction is a serious deficiency. I will describe two techniques that appear to contribute substantially to the amelioration of that disadvantage. One of these techniques has been tried with encouraging results; the other is simply a plan, yet to be implemented.

Simulated Tutoring

The first technique is termed "Simulated Tutoring." To create a simulated tutoring session, an experienced, linguistically trained language teacher is asked to tutor a live subject in the pronunciation of a short (4- or 5-line) dialogue. The recording equipment is connected in such a way that the student and tutor both see and hear each other but a recording is made only of the tutor's voice.

The resulting tape, then, contains all of the tutor's instructions, explanations, and so forth, with response pauses that are automatically located and timed to conform to the need of the situation. When a student subsequently takes the lesson for instructional purposes, he has the experience of interacting with a live tutor. Students report that the illusion is impressive and that the whole experience is quite interesting.

Before going on with a more analytical description of the technique, I would like to play for you a two-minute demonstration tape. We used the Spanish language for our experiment. Please keep in mind that this tape is a synthetic creation. The tutor's voice was recorded in one operation, and the student's voice was added later as he was responding to the pre-recorded tutor's voice.

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How a Tutoring Session is Created

Before sitting down to record a simulated tutoring session, the linguist-tutor must study the dialogue to be used and identify all pronunciation points likely to give trouble to the native American student. He then makes appropriate markings on his copy of the dialogue so that he can be sure to drill and explain each of these possible trouble spots regardless of whether the student who is serving as his foil makes these particular errors.

Selection of the Foil

The word "foil" is used to designate the individual who plays the role of a responding student during the recording of a tutoring session. He is called a "foil" because of the fact that his own behavior is secondary to that of the tutor. By his presence and by his responses he enables the tutor to automatically control response pauses and to perform in a more effective fashion.

In recording the tutoring sessions near the beginning of the course, the foil should be a person who has little or no knowledge of the target language but who is not totally inapt. If the foil is too skilled, he tends to respond too quickly to the tutor's directions so that the resultant tape pauses tend to be too short. In contrast, a foil with extremely low language aptitude takes far too long to respond and, in addition, makes so many unpredictable errors that the tutor finds it impossible to pace himself properly.

To record a tutoring session, the tutor and the foil sit in separate but adjacent soundproof studios. They see each other through a glass window separating the rooms and communicate via microphones and earphones. The tutor's voice, and only the tutor's voice, is recorded on a tape recorder located in the foil's room.

The student has in front of him a one-page printed lesson. This lesson contains a short paragraph describing the general setting in which the dialogue takes place, identifies the speakers and their social relationship, and gives a brief synopsis of the content of their conversation.

Immediately following the introductory paragraph there appears the printed Spanish dialogue on the left side of the page and the English equivalent of each line, on the right side of the page. After the student has read the introductory paragraph, the actual tutoring session begins.

The tutor works from an outline rather than a script in order to enhance his spontaneity or life-like manner. No two tutoring sessions are exactly alike but the following *kinds* of activities occur in each session:

(1) Subject listens to complete enactments of the dialogue by native speakers of Spanish.
(2) The native American tutor models each complete line for imitation by subject.
(3) "Reverse build-up" exercises are carried out for each line. That is, the tutor has subject imitate the last segment of a line, then the last two segments, and so forth, until the entire line is built-up and imitated.
(4) All known trouble spots are modeled, analyzed by the tutor, and imitated by subject.
(5) Subject encodes each line in response to English cues.
(6) Subject decodes each line.
(7) The tutor and the subject enact the roles of the dialogue, then repeat with roles reversed.

(8) As a final step, subject listens again to a complete enactment of the dialogue by native speakers.

It is considered desirable that the tutor speak with a friendly, encouraging manner. He should in fact ad lib, assuming adequate preparation. Occasional lapses from good English grammar, as are typical in spontaneous conversational English, are considered acceptable when recording a tutoring session.

The tutor always speaks Spanish that is correct in all its nuances. He calls attention to all (or practically all) of the phonological features that are likely to be difficult for native English speakers. But he avoids excessive attention to those subtle features of Spanish phonology that generally are mastered only by advanced, high aptitude students. In other words, the tutor must keep in mind the general goal of making the student's speech *intelligible* but not native-like.

In striving to get the student to produce difficult sounds, the tutor can draw on almost any techniques that occur to him. A technique often used with success by our linguist is as follows:

The student is asked to imitate a series of short utterances beginning with an English word or phrase, and proceeding through an ordered series of distortions of these which approximate more and more closely the target utterance. For example, many Americans find it difficult to pronounce the Spanish word "gracias." The student may come closer to an acceptable pronunciation of this word by responding to these instructions. "You say what I say: Good day_____; Good day_____; Good dah_____; Good dah_____; Now say it in one syllable: Gooddah_____; Gooddah_____; Now say: ahss_____; ahss_____; see ahss_____; see ahss_____; good dah see ahss_____; good dah see ahss." If the student imitates the last model rapidly, he is likely to produce an utterance that sounds reasonably close to the correct pronunciation of "gracias."

Although the tutor tries to sound encouraging, he must avoid being effusive in complimenting the student. It would obviously be undesirable for some future student to fumble hopelessly and then hear a cheery voice say "Splendid."

How Effective is the Technique?

At this time we have no objective data attesting to the efficacy of the technique, but plans have been developed for seeking such evidence. The basic idea is to have a panel of experienced language teachers listen to playbacks of simulated tutoring sessions and list all pronunciation errors in each protocol which they would consider serious enough to merit further remedial efforts were they actually tutoring the student in question. If such error counts are found to reliably decline, between initial and final performance, this will constitute quasi-objective evidence for the effectiveness of the technique. Appropriate controls will be arranged to minimize the effects of evaluator bias.

As of now, the only data we have to support the efficacy of the technique are: (a) subjective impressions of our research staff and others who have listened to demonstration tapes and (b) testimonials of students who have gone through portions of our course.

All students who have taken some of our simulated tutoring lessons, reported that they found them extremely interesting and quite helpful. Actually, it is our opinion that the extensive use of this technique in programed language courses can be justified solely on motivational grounds. A notorious weakness of programed courses is that students get so bored from the monotony, solitude, and so forth, that they tend to drop out at a high rate. Any technique that can stimulate and sustain student interest is probably worthy of inclusion in a programed course, even if its intrinsic pedagogic value may be quite modest.

As a final comment on Simulated Tutoring, let me say that we do not regard the technique as capable of carrying an entire course. It is simply *one* technique which, we believe, can be a valuable and colorful supplement to the more conventional techniques of programed language instruction.

Simulated Conversation

The other technique I want to describe is called "Simulated Conversation." As of now, it is only a plan or scheme, or you might say, "a gleam in my eye." We have not yet actually created a simulated conversation, but I am optimistic that it can be done.

The basic notion in Simulated Conversation is that the student will be confronted with a situation in which he must respond to somewhat unpredictable communications from a tape recorder. In real life, one never knows precisely what his conversational partner will say. It is this element of unpredictability which makes real life conversation so different from most taped language learning materials.

Obviously, before any student is placed in a "simulated conversation," he must already be familiar with the sentence patterns and lexical items which he will encounter. However, he need not know exactly what sentences he will encounter nor in what sequences. This kind of technique obviously cannot be used in the elementary stages of a course, but only after the student has some minimum competency in the language.

Let me describe one possible exercise of this sort. The student is told, in English, that he is to imagine himself in the process of buying a pair of shoes. He is provided with other items of information relevant to this purchase. For example, he is told to familiarize himself with the following list of characteristics of the transaction.

Color desired:	black
Size:	11
Style:	something modern or fashionable
Maximum price:	15 pesos
Mode of payment:	a 20-dollar traveler's check

By supplying the student with these details about the simulated transaction, we hope to restrict or delimit the range of possible responses he will make, and thus enhance the likelihood that the simulated conversation will go smoothly.

After the student has studied this information about the future transaction, he is directed to turn on his tape recorder and interact with the "shoe clerk" who will start the conversation with a greeting

Here, in English, is what a typical conversation in this setting might be like:

Tape: Good morning, sir.
Subject: Good morning.
Tape: May I help you?
Subject: Yes, I want to buy a pair of shoes.
Tape: Any particular style, sir?
Subject: Something modern, please.
Tape: What size do you wear?
Subject: Size 11.
Tape: Here is a nice pair, size 11, and they are the latest style.
Subject: How much do they cost?
Tape: Only 18 pesos, sir.
Subject: Too expensive. I don't want to spend more than 15 pesos.
Tape: Here is another nice pair and they cost only 13 pesos.
Subject: Fine. I'll buy these.
Tape: How do you wish to pay, sir?
Subject: With a 20-dollar traveler's check.
Tape: Fine. Sign here please.
Subject: All right.
Tape: Here is your change and thank you very much.

It should be kept in mind that a student who is going through such an exercise would hear only the utterances of the tape; he would have to generate his own responses. I will readily admit that the hypothetical conversation was conducted more smoothly than we could expect to happen in real life. Sometimes I assumed rather gratuitously what the student would say.

The most difficult problem about programing an exercise of this sort would be that of providing adequate feedback to the student. We *must* have some means of informing him concerning the adequacy of his responses. I have tried to structure this hypothetical situation in sufficient detail so as to limit the variety of student responses. After each student response the tape must inform the student concerning each of the possible responses that would have been acceptable. If the number of possible responses is too large, the whole exercise would become bogged down hopelessly because of the lengthy feedback process.

I am well aware of the fact that the process of supplying feedback (i.e., confirmation) to the student will, even under optimal conditions, diminish greatly the realism of the simulated conversation.

To partially compensate for this I propose to have the student go through the conversation two times with feedback and then go through the conversation a third time without feedback. Presumably by that time he will *know* what responses are acceptable and can emit them with little hesitation. This would, I think, give him a fairly realistic experience of taking part in a real life conversation on a practical and meaningful topic.

I hope that by this time next year I will have some hard data supporting the value of both of these proposed techniques for providing communication experiences in programed language instruction.

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